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**PANEL II**

**Environmental management and mitigation of natural disasters:  
a gender perspective**

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[English only]

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**Background and acknowledgement**

1. It is widely known and accepted that disasters affect women and men differently. These effects have also a different impact depending on culture and socio-economic contexts. This paper describes the main aspects and outlines some possible directions on how to mainstream gender concerns into disaster risk reduction in the framework of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction.

2. Disaster reduction is an imperative for sustainable development, as well as a topic for gender-sensitive strategies. Disaster reduction policies and measures aims enabling societies and communities to be resilient to natural hazards with a two-fold aim: to reduce the level of risk in societies, while ensuring, on the other hand, that development efforts do not increase the vulnerability to these hazards.

3. Numerous disasters could have been avoided or mitigated if disaster reduction measures had been in place. The twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: Gender Equality, Development and Peace for the Twenty-first Century" (Beijing+5), called on Governments and other national and international actors to incorporate a gender perspective into disaster prevention, mitigation and recovery strategies. It also recommended that the international community should assist governments in developing gender-sensitive

## **Gender Mainstreaming in Disaster Reduction**

### **I. Disaster Impact on the Rise....**

over the means of production, restricted mobility, limited facilities for education and lack of employment, inequalities in food intake relative to men, etc.” “The housewives and young mothers affected from floods and displaced. . . found it more difficult to find wage labour and other income-earning opportunities. The women who had lost all their meager belongings and their life-long savings have not been able to compensate their losses even after decades. This situation has threatened their security within the family relationship. Children (both girls and boys) dropped out from schooling. And young girls whose families lost their savings and jewellery during the floods, which was to provide [their] dowry in marriage, either lost the opportunity, or had to delay getting married, which has serious implications for their social status, psychology and survival. . . With regard to the old, in re-settling the extended families have been broken up in many instances leaving the old more vulnerable without the family support.” *Madhavi Ariyabandu, Programme Manager-Disaster Mitigation, ITDG-South Asia,*

12. "Sliding lands at the edges of mountains and hills because of the increasing rates of

## 17. Risk Awareness and Assessment

- Understanding the nature of hazards *Hazards are inevitable, but disasters are not. By seeking to understand and to anticipate future hazards by study of the past and consideration of present situations, a community or public authority is poised to minimize the risk of a disaster. It is a measure of people's wisdom and a society's values if a community is able to learn from others' experiences, rather than to suffer its own. There is a wealth of knowledge about the nature and consequences of different hazards, expected frequency, magnitude and geographical potential impact, but many fewer examples of lessons learned from them.*
- Identifying vulnerabilities and capacities *Risk is rooted in conditions of physical, social, economic and environmental vulnerability that need to be assessed and managed on a continuing basis, with the primary objective being to minimize such exposure through the development and reliance on individual capabilities and institutional capacities that can withstand potential loss or damage, or to hasten recovery if loss or damage occur.*
- Disaster risk assessment and analysis *A comprehensive risk assessment system and analysis, based on detailed and accurate information on both hazard and vulnerability, regularly updated and widely disseminated, is a pre-requisite to an adequate and successful disaster reduction strategy*

## 18. Institutional and Operational Contexts of Disaster Reduction

- The cultural, political, economic, environmental and sustainable development contexts
- International, regional and sub-regional context and cooperation

## 19. Primary Operational Functions for Effective Disaster Reduction

- Policy and legal development: national and local decision making and participatory processes
- Land-use planning
- Scientific, technical and professional applications
- Protection of critical facilities, infrastructure, in rural and urban environments
- Early warning systems
- Community processes and action
- Partnerships: public, private, professional

## 20. Knowledge and Information

- Public awareness
- Information management and communication
- Education and training

21. A starting point for gender analysis for disaster reduction would be to pose the following questions:

- a) How and by whom are decisions taken in a community and society in "normal times" for development purposes- and how does it apply to each of the disaster reduction components?

- b) What are the factors, which hinder, prevent or delay gender balance, and in particular women's empowerment and how does this increase the exposure and vulnerability to natural hazards?
- c) What are the elements that would be required to ensure sustainability of gender balance and empowerment of women with regards to disaster and vulnerability reduction?

### **III. Women as Actors for Change**

22. Although women's social, economic and political position in many societies makes them more vulnerable to natural hazards, they are not helpless victims. Women are important agents for change and need to be further strengthened as such. Recognising and mobilising their skills and capacities as social force and channelling it to enhance efforts to protect their safety and that of their communities and dependants is a major task in any disaster reduction strategy. By and large, for example, African women are the backbone of the rural subsistence economy: it is their productive work that sustains families and communities. Securing food, water and fuel are key community concerns, especially in rural areas where natural disasters are more likely to devastate the very basis of people's livelihoods, since they depend more on the natural resource base for all aspects of life. Women's work in agriculture is often seen as an extension of their domestic responsibilities, rather than a separate economic activity. Distinguishing women's agricultural work from other types of labour puts them in an economic category, which means that her participation in agriculture can be recognized in national labour statistics<sup>6</sup>. Legitimizing women's labour in this way makes it easier to advocate for training and education programs for women agricultural workers, essential if women are to become environmentally sound farmers and thus engaged in vulnerability reduction to natural hazards.

23. There are many examples of women's informal community involvement in disaster reduction, but women are still largely excluded from formal planning and decision-making and need to be empowered to do so effectively. This is essential to ensure effective disaster reduction policies.

24. "If some decision-making is shifted to local levels (communities and aggregate of communities), then women will have major opportunities . . . One good example of how women are now holding parity (half) in local councils has occurred in villages in Thailand. Women naturally came to the foreground because they tend to volunteer their energies to improve their communities. Within 5-6 years. . . they reached parity and were learning to be community managers within the official framework, not only informally. In this case, issues of environment, disasters and development were the main topics".

*Jeanne-Marie Col, United Nations, on-line conference, Oct 2001*

Social Action) that before the cyclone, women would rarely come out and interact on social issues, let alone interact with outsiders. This changed after the cyclone, because relief packages of most NGOs, and even the government, were targeted at, or through, women. That phase really empowered them, made them amenable to interacting on social issues, and also increased their self-esteem and their status within their families and society!

-What are the factors, which lead to women's empowerment that is sustainable and gender equitable? The one that clearly stands out is control over resources. The Orissa example is one where the fact that women received the family relief kits, house building grants, loans and . . . memberships, and passed on the benefits to the families, made all the difference.

-Self-help income-generating measures following South Asian cyclones started a new social system, wherein the position of women is higher than it ever was. This appears to have been well accepted by everyone. Also important here is the role of an Indian Constitutional Amendment reserving one-third of seats in elected local governments (rural and urban) for women. Though there have been teething problems in the process, there is promise of a very positive impact.”

*Anshu Sharma, SEEDS, India. On-line conference, Oct. 2001.*

26. Another example is found in Bangladesh, where a widow, who lost her husband in the 1970 cyclone, formed a Women's organization in 1985.<sup>7</sup> By the loss of her husband she was encouraged to take action to educate herself and then help prepare the community to face natural hazards. The organization empowers women with knowledge and skills in income generation and saving, health and rehabilitation of disaster victims. This organization was the driving force behind women and children moving to safer areas during the 1991 cyclone. Women moving out of households into cyclone shelters were opposed initially by male members of the community, but was endorsed soon after, when they had seen the effects.

#### **IV. Linking gender issues and disaster reduction to sustainable development**

27. We often tend to discuss sustainable development and disaster reduction as two separate 'components'. However, fundamentally the aims are the same in both. Sustainable development is incomplete and not reachable unless disaster reduction (in particular prevention and mitigation measures) is reconsidered and integrated as an essential element in it, and disaster reduction cannot be managed apart from development. Disaster reduction is about taking measures in advance, addressing risk reduction, involving environmental protection, social equity and economic growth, the three cornerstones of sustainable development, to ensure that development efforts do not increase the vulnerability to hazards. Gender cuts across and is built in for both disaster reduction and sustainable development. It addresses, in essence, gender equality and balance, and the methods of analysis and tools of application should therefore be the same for both processes<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Sabiha Khatun, in the video South Asian Women, Facing Disasters, Securing life, by Duryog Nivaran, 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Madhavi Ariyabandu, Programme Manager - Disaster Mitigation, ITDG South Asia.



28. It is important to stress that gender equality in disaster reduction requires, above all, empowering women to have an increasing role in leadership, management and decision making positions.

29. Caution should also be raised against implementing gender-targeted programming without full and complete gender analysis<sup>9</sup>, since they then may get a non-wished, negative impact. “What responding agencies actually do before, during, and after disasters matters to both women and men, who may be hurt by gender-blind programming, for example with respect to reconstruction resources or information or access to health services”, concluded participants at the above mentioned email discussion. They argued for more community-based, inclusive, non-bureaucratic approaches to disaster management, informed by a nuanced gender perspective understanding and respect for local cultures and the causes of root causes of gender inequality and need of local solutions, enhancing of management and leadership capacities, and links with development theory and practice.

## VI. Some Ways Forward

30. Disaster reduction is envisioned within the ISDR framework<sup>10</sup>, aiming at building disaster resilient societies and communities to withstand natural hazards and related technological and environmental disasters, and to reduce environmental, human, economic and social losses:

31. The Strategy is built around four major objectives, which are:

- **Increasing public awareness** on hazard risks, vulnerability and actions for disaster reduction;
- **Obtaining the commitment from public** abilitytal henh

recommendations outlined in the final report of that meeting constitute a good guide to integrate gender concerns into disaster risk reduction.

34. In the context of disaster risk reduction gender mainstreaming<sup>12</sup>: refers to fostering awareness about gender equity and equality, etc, to help reduce the impact of disasters, and to incorporate gender analysis in disaster management, risk reduction and sustainable development to decrease vulnerability. Gender mainstreaming in disaster reduction is a parallel but inter-linked process to the mainstreaming of disaster reduction into sustainable development policies and activities.

35. Based on the objectives of ISDR, these are some specific conclusions, drawn from then literature and the expert meeting in Ankara:

### **Increasing public awareness**

36. The profile and benefits of gender sensitive disaster risk reduction policy must be explained, promoted and clearly demonstrable.

37. Up-to-date and high quality statistics and studies need to be undertaken, as well as a framework for collection of disaggregated data taking into account different social relations, affected population by sex and age, roles and responsibilities in disaster management, development and environmental management and risk reduction. As pointed out by the expert meeting in Ankara, evidence available is mostly anecdotal. Integrating gender concerns into the strategic disaster reduction areas mentioned above, is still a rather undocumented domain. The gaps in the research need to be addressed and existing research results and case studies need to be widely disseminated to policy makers and planners.

38. Specific programmes to encourage and support research by relevant academic and training institutions need to be developed. Sensitive education is needed at all levels (Pre-school, primary, secondary and tertiary), and programmes addressing the need for change in government or non-governmental sectors, as well as programme-targeted training or awareness-raising. Education content should foster sound environmental management, risk management and address how and why gender is a central concern in the work ahead to build safer, more equitable, and disaster-resilient communities.

### **Obtaining commitment from public authorities.**

39. A major challenge ahead is to integrate gender, development and environmental management and disaster risk reduction both in research and praxis. This means new approaches and challenging of the boundaries between ways of thinking and working, and between distinct institutional responsibilities. There is a need for practical gender analysis tools that help demystify and overcome gender stereotypes and provide practical strategies so that the potential of both women and men are developed in a balanced manner.

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<sup>12</sup> **Gender mainstreaming:** This is the process of bringing a gender perspective into the mainstream activities of governments at all levels, as a means of promoting the role of women in the field of development, integrating women's values into development work. Gender mainstreaming builds on the knowledge and lessons -learnt from previous experiences with gender equality policies.

40. By working towards increased commitment for disaster risk reduction from public authorities, gender sensitiveness should be an inherent, cross-cutting concern. In this regard, national legislation and regulation must be reviewed to identify gaps and obstacles to gender equality.

**Stimulating inter-disciplinary and intersectoral partnerships and the expansion of risk reduction networking**

41. Improved networking among national and local disaster, risk management related agencies and organizations with sustainable development networks needs to be encouraged. Women and community-based organizations should be invited and stimulated to participate in local and national networks.

42. There is a need for a focus on the disaster and sustainable development planning processes and ensure a participatory approach and involvement of non-traditional/non-conventional ideas and partners. If the process is cumulative, it can incorporate lessons learned and improve the outcomes from the next event<sup>13</sup>.

**Fostering better understanding and knowledge of the causes of disasters, as well as the promotion of research.**

43. The challenge is to go beyond the study of the impact of disasters, the emergency phase, and look into the role of gender in contributing to increased risk–

men never discussed the warnings with their wives and continued to "blow their money in bars" without regard to their future situation. . . One of the problems with [male-dominated networks of information] is that women are primarily responsible for gardening/agriculture, securing land-based food resources, and budgeting water resources for household consumption and gardening in these places. Without access to information, they cannot minimize risks